

# DREAM CATCHER

The New York Times Bestseller

'Blows the lid off her  
father's bizarre, secretive  
life ... fascinating'  
*New York Post*

## My Life With J. D. SALINGER

MARGARET A. SALINGER

# Dream Catcher

A MEMOIR



Margaret A. Salinger



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Praise for Margaret A. Salinger  
and  
DREAM CATCHER



"Salinger's daughter's truths are as mesmerizing as his fiction. . . . There is information here that can't help altering, and enlarging, our estimation of Salinger's work. . . . This memoir may well prompt a reassessment of the place of Salinger's fiction in American literature, and add a dimension to the marginalized mystic he's become to many."

—*The New York Times*

"An unprecedented look at one of the country's most admired and reclusive writers."

—*USA Today*

"A hot new tell-all memoir that blows the lid off her eighty-one-year-old father's bizarre, secretive life. For J. D. Salinger fans and scholars, the details are fascinating. She sheds light on autobiographical elements in her father's writing and shares acute psychological insights."

—*New York Post*

“Margaret A. Salinger is an artful and accomplished writer.”

—*The Toronto Sun*

“Peggy Salinger has become a sort of dream catcher herself.”

—*NPR's Morning Edition*

“Utterly riveting in its narrative and its hard-won conclusions.”

—*The Globe and Mail* (Toronto)

“Imagine finding your father not at home but through his books. That's the journey Salinger's daughter details in this remarkable piece of writing.”

—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“*DREAM CATCHER* exposes the cracks in the façade of the Salinger mystique.”

—*Salon.com*

“Margaret A. Salinger's work shows the brilliance of what can happen when a woman's way of seeing is adroitly applied to a man's writing. . . . Rarely does a memoir do so much to make readers reconsider a body of fiction by a well-known writer. . . . This memoir has become one of the best books to surface in the world of Salinger criticism.”

—*Academic Writing Review*



"By fathering Margaret, or Peggy, America's best-known creator of precocious fictional siblings begot a daughter with a level of brilliance and moral fiber that has proved capable of taking on both the challenge of the flesh-and-blood J. D. Salinger and the mystique he has gone to vast lengths to cultivate. . . . A master interpreter of her father's work, Peggy skillfully balances her incisive readings of the stories with her father's motives and behaviors. What makes it so remarkable is the brilliance with which, in describing the process of winning her own salvation, the author deconstructs the Salinger myth."

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch* (VA)

"Peggy's diverse achievements and experience make *DREAM CATCHER* unlike any memoir . . . darkly comic."

—*The Jerusalem Report*

"Salinger's writing is vivid and strong."

—*The Telegraph* (UK)

"I found myself gaining personal insights from this book that applied to me both as a son and as a father. I could not ask for much more than that. There are, I believe, lessons here for all of us."

—*Buffalo Art News*

*For my family*

## Introduction



*Dreams, books, are each a world . . .  
with tendrils strong as flesh and blood . . .*

—"Personal Talk," William Wordsworth

I GREW UP IN A WORLD nearly devoid of living people. Cornish, where we lived, was wild and woody, our nearest neighbors a group of seven moss-covered gravestones that my brother and I once discovered while tracking a red salamander in the rain, two large stones with five small ones at their feet marking the passing of a family long ago. My father discouraged living visitors to such an extent that an outsider, looking in, might have observed a wasteland of isolation. Yet, as one of my father's characters, Raymond Ford, once wrote in his poem "The Inverted Forest"\*: "Not wasteland, but a great inverted forest, With all foliage underground." My childhood was lush with make-believe: wood sprites, fairies, a bower of imaginary friends, books about lands somewhere East of the Sun and West of the Moon. My father, too, spun tales of characters, both animal and human, who accompanied us throughout our day. My mother read to me by the hour. Years later, I read that my father's character Holden Caulfield had dreamt of having children in such a place someday; "we'd hide them away," he said, in his little cabin by the edge of a forest. He and his wife would buy them lots of books and teach them how to read and write.

---

\*"The Inverted Forest," *Cosmopolitan* 123 (Dec. 1947): 73-109.



In real life, however, it was a world that dangled between dream and nightmare on a gossamer thread my parents wove, without the reality of solid ground to catch a body should he or she fall. My parents dreamt beautiful dreams, but did not have the skill to wrest them from the air and bring them to fruition in daily life. My mother was a child when she had me. She remained a dreamer, and, like Lady Macbeth, a tortured nightwalker, for many years. My father, a writer of fiction, is a dreamer who barely can tie his own shoelaces in the real world, let alone warn his daughter she might stumble and fall.

Fiction, other worlds, other realities, were, for my father, far more real than living flora and fauna, flesh and blood. I remember once we were looking out of his living room window together at the beautiful view of field and forest, a patchwork of farms and mountains fading into the far distance. He waved a hand across it all as if to wipe it out and said, "All of this is *maya*, all an illusion. Isn't that wonderful?" I didn't say anything, but for me, who had fought long and hard for anything resembling solid ground, the idea of its vanishing from underneath me in one fell swoop was anything but wonderful. *Vertigo*, *annihilation*, *terror*, are words that come to my mind, certainly not *wonderful*. This was the dark side of the Inverted Forest.

I grew up in a world both terrible and beautiful, and grossly out of balance. It is, perhaps, part of the human condition that children, as they grow to adulthood, must disentangle themselves from who their parents dreamt they might be, in order to figure out who they really are or hope to be. For my mother, for my father's sister, and myself, this task brought us near to drowning, so entangled were we in tendrils, strong as flesh and blood, fantastic garlands of my father's dreams.

Laertes	Drowned! O, where?
Queen	There is a willow grows askant the brook, That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream. Therewith fantastic garlands did she make. . . . When down her weedy trophies and herself Fell in the weeping brook. . . .

Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,  
 As one incapable of her own distress,  
 Or like a creature native and endued  
 Unto that element. But long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death.

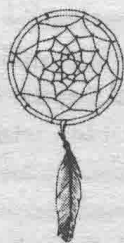
(*Hamlet*, IV, vii, 189–208)

My father once told a friend that for him the act of writing was inseparable from the quest for enlightenment, that he intended devoting his life to one great work, and that the work would be his life—there would be no separation. In real life, when he chooses to make himself available, he can be funny, intensely loving, and the person you most want to be with; however, for such *maya* as living persons to get in the way of his work, to interrupt the holy quest, is to commit sacrilege. I was nearly middle-aged before I broke the silence, broke the family idol guarding generations of moldy secrets, both real and imagined, and began to shed some light and fresh air, wholesome and life-giving as Cornish breezes.

After my son was born, I felt an urgency to make my way through the magic and the miasma alike, through both history and fiction, to figure out what is real and what is not, what is worth saving and passing on to my son as his precious inheritance, and what I want to filter out, as the Native American dream catcher that hangs over his bed filters out the nightmares in its web and lets the good dreams drip down the feather onto his sleeping forehead.

Although I thought that, as Holden said in the opening of *The Catcher in the Rye*, “my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them . . . especially my father,” I’m surprised and grateful about how generous the women in our family, my mother and my father’s only sister, have been with their stories when I finally worked up the nerve to ask. I also took my father’s advice to a young lady, an English student, many years ago, when he told her that he thought she’d do much better on her paper without any active cooperation by him. He was very polite and said he appreciated her good will; nevertheless, he told her, the biographi-

cal facts you want are in my stories, in one form or another, including the traumatic experiences you asked about. So with the help of my reflections on our life together, my reading and research into my father's life and work, and many long conversations with my aunt and my mother, I managed to piece together a story of how the Salinger family "was occupied and all." It may resemble a crazy quilt, but perhaps that's appropriate, too.



# Contents



## Introduction

xi

### PART ONE A FAMILY HISTORY: 1900-1955

*"How my parents were occupied and all before they had me"*

1. "Sometimes Thro' the Mirror Blue"	3
2. Landsman	16
3. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy	43
4. Detached F-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s	70
5. We'll Bolt the Door	80
6. Reclusion	92

### PART TWO CORNISH: 1955-1968

7. Dream Child, Real Child	113
8. Babes in the Woods	130
9. Border Crossing	138
10. Snipers	152
11. "However Innumerable Beings Are, I Vow to Save Them"	162
12. Glimpses	172

# Contents

13.	"There She Weaves by Night and Day"	177
14.	Journey to Camelot	184
15.	Boot Camp and Iced Tea	196
16.	The Birds and the Bees: Hitchcock's	210
17.	A Perfect Ten	221
18.	Notes from the Underground	232
19.	"To Sir with Love"	251
20.	Safe Harbor: A Brief Interlude Between Islands	265

## PART THREE BEYOND CORNISH

21.	Island Redux	273
22.	Christmas	298
23.	Midwinter	313
24.	Springtime in Paradise: <i>The Producers</i>	317
25.	Woodstock	322
26.	Lost Moorings	341
27.	Kindred Spirits	350
28.	The Baby Vanishes	359
29.	A Mind in Port	378
30.	"Rowing in Eden"	385
31.	Woman Overboard!	394
32.	On and Off the Fast Track	398
33.	Weaving My Own Life	404
34.	Awakening	419
	Afterword	435
	Acknowledgments	449

PART ONE

A FAMILY HISTORY:  
1900–1955

*"How my parents were occupied and all before they had me"*



*Four gray walls, and four gray towers,  
Overlook a space of flowers,  
And the silent isle imbowers  
The Lady of Shalott. . . .*

*There she weaves by night and day  
A magic web with colors gay.  
She has heard a whisper say,  
A curse is on her if she stay  
To look down to Camelot.*

—“The Lady of Shalott,” Alfred, Lord Tennyson



# A FAMILY HISTORY

1808-1977

1808

1808-1810  
1810-1820  
1820-1830  
1830-1840  
1840-1850  
1850-1860  
1860-1870  
1870-1880  
1880-1890  
1890-1900  
1900-1910  
1910-1920  
1920-1930  
1930-1940  
1940-1950  
1950-1960  
1960-1970  
1970-1977

1808-1810

## 1

# “Sometimes Thro’ the Mirror Blue”\*



*“Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question, my dear, and you should not go on licking your paw like that—as if Dinah hadn’t washed you this morning! You see, Kitty, it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too! Was it the Red King, Kitty? You were his wife, my dear, so you ought to know—Oh, Kitty, do help to settle it! I’m sure your paw can wait!”*

—Chapter 12, “Which Dreamed It?”  
*Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll

MAMA SAID THAT WHEN SHE WAS A LITTLE GIRL, before her house in London was bombed, she would often creep out of her bed at night and open the door between her nursery and the top of the back staircase that led down to the kitchen. She’d tiptoe downstairs to make sure the door was closed and no servants were around. Then, spreading her white nightgown around her and slowly rising off the ground, she would fly up and down the passageway. She knew she hadn’t been dreaming because when she awoke on mornings after flight, there would be dust on her fingertips where she had touched the ceiling.<sup>†</sup>

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\*“And sometimes thro’ the mirror blue, The knights come riding two and two: She hath no loyal knight and true, The Lady of Shalott.”

<sup>†</sup>“[Franny, age seven] went on at beautiful length about how she used to fly all around the apartment when she was four and no one was home. . . . He said she

My mother was a child hidden away. She, like many upper-class and upper-middle-class English children of her day, was raised by staff in the nursery. I grew up hearing grim tales of nursery life. The one brief, bright spot was a nice governess, Nurse Reed, who took little Claire home with her on visits to her family. Nurse Reed's replacement, a Swiss-German who, among her many delightful qualities, used to force Claire, after lunch, to sit on the toilet until she "produced," or until suppertime, whichever came first, was more the norm. I knew, too, that she was sent to convent boarding school when she was only five years old and that she was taught to bathe her little body under a sheet so God wouldn't be offended by her nakedness. I used to think about that when I was a little girl sitting in the tub, how scary a wet sheet over you would feel, as if you'd get caught under the immensity of it and sucked down the drain. Once, when I was in the hospital with poison ivy, my mother told me that when she was at the convent and got poison ivy, the nuns scrubbed her head to toe, beneath the sheet of course, with a bristle brush and lye soap to remove the evil ivy boils.

What I didn't understand was *why* she was there. I didn't wonder about it when I was little and assumed that things just happen to children as inexorably as the catechism. But now, as an adult, it no longer made sense to me, and I asked her about it. My mother explained that at the time, in the fall of 1939, the fact that loomed largest in most Londoners' lives was that there was a war on. During the Blitz, parents with the means and "any *sense* at all," she said, took their families out of London and went to stay with friends or relatives in the country. The Douglas family had both country relations and money; nevertheless, Claire and her brother, Gavin, were packed on a train, unaccompanied, "with all the poor children," and evacuated to a convent at St. Leonard's-by-the-Sea. St. Leonard's had the unfortunate geographical attribute of being opposite Dunkirk, and they were soon evacuated again, this time inland to a sister convent in what my mother only remembers as a red-bricked city. She was five years old.

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surely just *dreamt* that she was able to fly. The baby stood her ground like an angel. She said she *knew* she was able to fly because when she came down she always had dust on her fingers from touching the light bulbs" (*Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, p. 9).